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ABSTRACT

A discussion of bilingualism, biliteracy, and the educational context of Sub-Saharan Africa has three areas of focus. The first is the argument that the school environment is a complex one for bilingual education, biliteracy, and socialization generally in this multiethnic area, and that ideology and literacy issues feed language politics at several levels in the region. The second is that in spite of institutional efforts, only functionally limited bilingualism is available to many people, due to differences in public practice and private desires. In addition to external pressures such as flow of capital and popular culture, which have their preferred languages, issues such as minority status, language status, social attitudes, and cultural values are factors in the development of bilingual identity, and explain why biliteracy does not always accompany bilingualism. The third argument is for a program of school bilingualism geared toward creating a responsible citizenry rather than developing bilingualism as an end in itself. Contains 46 references. (MSE)

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Bilingualism, Biliteracy, Classrooms and Identity Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

This paper has three main objectives. First, it seeks to demonstrate that school presents a complex environment for bilingual education, biliteracy and socialization generally in multiethnicity-riddled sub-Saharan Africa and that ideology and pragmatic literacy feed language politics at several levels in the region (see Mansour 1980, 1993). Second, it argues that in spite of institutional efforts, only functionally limited bilingualism is available to many due to differences between government policies, public practice and private desires (Omoniyi 1995). In addition to external pressures from more global forces like capital flow and popular culture which have their preferred languages, issues such as minority ethnicity, language status, social attitudes and cultural values are some of the intervening factors in constructing bilingual identities in sub-Saharan Africa. These pressures will explain why biliteracy may not always accompany bilingualism more so when English-knowing bilingualism (Pakir 1983) is marked by L1 reduction. Third, the paper advocates a program of school bilingualism geared towards creating responsible citizenship rather than certificated bilingualism as an end in itself.

Background

In Africa as a whole and in the sub-Saharan region in particular language engenders a complex politics. Among language researchers there are scholars whose interest lie in establishing the theoretical and practical implications of multilingualism for the classroom. There are those who focus on the sociopolitical dimension of multiethnicity and multilingualism in relation to the task of forging cohesion and a sense of statehood. There are also those who are concerned with the economics of various multilingual education policies. Whichever way we look at it, these various interests interconnect and impact one upon the other. These various interests are often passionately pursued because of the manner in which the notions of identity, both individual and group, that they support are themselves passionately political and politicized.

Definition of key terms

A number of concepts are fundamental to this discussion. Among these, the terms, 'school', 'bilingualism' and 'biliteracy' are central and as such require that an attempt be made to provide operational definitions for them.

School

There's a universal understanding of school as a spatial and formal construct, one in which the production and dissemination of knowledge take place. The producers and disseminators are called teachers and the beneficiaries or consumers are called pupils/students. In reality, they share knowledge production between them inasmuch as the latter bring with them cultural repertoires that inform teachers' choice of procedure and occasionally even content.

But school is indeed more than 'just' that. The issues that sociologists of education deal with prove that much. In pluralistic societies these can be complex. Debates and decisions about locating schools, allocating funds, designing the curriculum, employing of teachers and other staffers etc. involve substantial politics and politicking, perhaps more than those involved in debating the impeachment of a president, especially in new nation-states where the sociopolitical equilibrium is constantly under scrutiny. The slightest imbalance may result in a

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conflagration that brings a region to the attention of the entire global media fraternity with the UNHCR tagging closely behind. Considering that only a relatively small percentage of the population of sub-Saharan Africa has literacy rates in Western education terms (see Table 1) within the range of 10-69%, the school and the subsequent control of government by a powerful educated minority who benefit from it are significant factors.

Table 1: Literacy rates in five sub-Saharan states

Country	Population	% of Total Pop.	%Male	%Female
Benin	5.9m	37	48.7	25.8
Ghana	18m	64.5	75.9	53.5
Malawi	9.95	25-41	*	*
Nigeria	107m	57.1	67.3	47.3
Senegal	9.4m	33.1	43	23.2

• = data not available

In this regard, school may be construed as the breeding ground for society's elite. The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed an increasing rural-urban drift occasioned by a preference for all forms of white-collar jobs over farm work. Education was and is still construed as the fare needed in order to make that trip. Omoniyi (1990) discussed the implications of rural/urban environments on language proficiency attainment levels among Nigeria's secondary school students. That, in itself, is already some form of politics if we consider that achievement tests mark out the paths to socioeconomic success and access to power. This raises the issue of distribution by region, ethnicity, gender and so forth, which may reflect varying degrees of inequity. Thus the position of school as a facilitator in relation to Nancy Hornberger's 'continua of biliteracy' concept is variable depending on location and pattern of enrolment. Other readings of school will emerge in the course of my discussion.

Bilingualism and biliteracy

These terms complement each other in a way, with bilingualism suggesting the possession of speaking *and therefore listening* skills in two languages and biliteracy the possession of reading and writing skills in two languages. It is often the case though that people presume the latter to be subsumed in the former even though they are not mutually inclusive. The literature is rich with definitions and varieties of bilingualism and biliteracy. Researchers like Richard Gardener, Jim MacNamara, Fred Genesee, Wallace Lambert, Richard Tucker, Joshua Fishman, Colin Baker, Viv Edwards, Adebisi Afolayan, Ayo Bamgbose, Gerda Mansour, Casmir Rubagumya, Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui, Ralph Fasold and others too numerous to list here have brought the perspectives of their disciplinary interests to bear on these terms.

Afolayan (1995) regards these terms to be quintessentially inappropriate in describing Africa's situation because in reality Africa is substantially multilingual and every nation on the continent is according to him a 'multinationality polity'. The definitions are harmonious with Britain's Department for Education and Employment's description of literacy as uniting 'the important skills of reading and writing' first and foremost (see DfEE 1998: 3). The DfEE document goes further to say literacy also 'involves speaking and listening, which, although they are not separately identified in the Framework, are an essential part of it'. These definitions are silent on both degree of competence and patterns of bilingualism. Thus they do not take into account the distinction that Baker (1996) makes, for instance, between transitional and permanent bilingualism (cf. *substractive* and *balanced* bilingualism). These amount to significant lapses if we consider the status of language as symbolic capital. For in

Africa, critical literacy must involve an understanding of the politics that informs people's choice of languages and the institutional design and implementation of literacy programs

Fasold reporting on vernacular literacy in four sub-Saharan countries (Kenya, Uganda, Central African Republic and Nigeria) remarks that literacy needs to be understood with reference to both environment and sub-cultural variability. In other words, to assume that a universalistic model of literacy and its programming is possible may lead to 'many silly mistakes' being made (1997: 255). For example, it would be crazy to contemplate designing and administering the same literacy program to South Africa and Nigeria (cf. Prinsloo and Breier 1996)! Similarly, the situation that Garcia and Otheguy (1987) reported on in Dade County (Florida) had its own sub-cultural peculiarities. Thus in defining biliteracy, we must pause and ask 'Whose literacy and for what purpose?' As Afolayan (1995) remarked, pre-European bilingualism was determined by the characteristics of specific contact situations, the people involved, their trades/professions, as well as, one must add, the direction of tilt in the balance of power between them. The differences in climatic conditions meant that certain products thrived only in certain parts of the region thus determining the structure of the network of exchange of goods and services set up within the region. But society in the new nations has become more complex and hence parents' insistence that their children go to school to acquire a more propitious bilingualism, that is English + an indigenous language

There are two senses in which bilingualism is often used in public discourse. The first is limited in scope in recognizing only the possession of speaking skills in two languages and the second demands that bilinguals possess all four communicative skills in two languages. Sarah Hudelson, sees literacy as going beyond performance using 'a set of skills' to 'having the potential to open up new ways of viewing the world and transforming it' (1994: 130). In this connection, therefore, biliteracy should open up additional 'worlds' (or 'nationalities' in the case of Africa's multinationality polity) to those who possess it. These expectations of bilingualism and biliteracy would require that the indigenous languages are not consigned to High-Low relationship vis-à-vis the ex-colonial languages. In reality, policy provisions in sub-Saharan Africa with the implicit nomination of English, French, Portuguese and other European languages as the language(s) of literacy are directly counter-positioned to such wider-scoped literacy.

The Literacy Hour in the British school system is defined as 'a time for the explicit teaching of reading and writing' (DfEE, 1998) without specifying the language in which it will be done. This may be unnecessary since English is both the *de jure* and *de facto* language of practically all businesses, especially government business, including schooling. The same 'openness' in the wording of language policy in sub-Saharan Africa has dire implications for the indigenous languages which I shall discuss in a later section.

Language politics in sub-Saharan Africa:

Precolonial Africa presented a façade of homogeneous political entities, kingdoms that were carved around specific ethnic groupings. History however provides evidence that long before the scramble for and partition of Africa by European powers, contact was already an established phenomenon in the region albeit limited. The Trans-Saharan trade routes of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries for instance introduced aspects of Arabic and other Middle Eastern cultures and languages to the Savannah areas of present day West Africa. The ancient kingdom of Ghana, and the Mali and Songhay empires had Arabic taught in their courts under Sundiata Keita, Mansa Musa and Sunni Ali respectively, thus introducing a link between language, education and economics to sub-Saharan Africa much earlier than contemporary

literature often cares to go back. Of course, bilingualism, biliteracy and biculturalism were accompanying elements of that contact as we find for example in language behavior and the architecture of the area which reflect generous Middle Eastern influences. Afolayan (1995: 238) reports that in Nigeria bilingualism predated the Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the British colonial authorities in 1914.

More contemporary literature often refers to the political and linguistic maps that emerged in the aftermath of the Berlin Convention of 1884 at which new territorial boundaries were drawn. These new boundaries demarcate new nation-states characterized mostly by a merging of diverse ethnic kingdoms and peoples in some places and by a bisection of communities in others (Omoniyi 1997, 1999). Perhaps more important is the manner in which the language politics of these groups now serve to reflect the larger politics of Britain and France, the two main colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa. By this I refer, for instance, to language politics in Britain as exemplified by discussions about language in the national curriculum, minority languages, multiculturalism and so on. The controversy generated by the language in the national curriculum (LINC) on form and content and the impact that the debates have had on developments in the teaching and learning of English around the world (see Carter 1995) represent one dimension of that politics. Rodolfo Jacobson's (1990) work on the impact of distribution in bilingual schooling highlights other intricate issues involved. The competition for the most global spread between English and French represents another dimension of language politics. Because all of these occur within interconnecting networks, language issues in sub-Saharan Africa some times seem a mere reflection of the global. I shall expand on this point and explain its relevance to bilingual education and biliteracy next.

Addressing the sixth summit of the Standing Council of Francophony in Cotonou, Benin Republic in December 1995 Jacque Chirac of France proclaimed La Francophonie a 'political ideal: with patience and pragmatism, the Francophone institutions, following a natural inclination affirm a political identity.' This proclamation sets the context for his comment to the effect that French 'must not be seen as the language of just one country. The use of French is above all the affirmation of an identity that transcends the frontiers between peoples and ethnic groups, and political, cultural or religious divisions'. Implicit in this unity is the exclusion of non-French speaking peoples of West Africa thus confirming the existence of an in-group/out-group dichotomy that has outlived its colonial authors. This is the situation I found doing fieldwork on the Nigeria-Benin border in 1991-1992.

Ironically, in what almost sounded like bully tactic and a threat President Chirac at the same summit cautioned saying 'make no mistake: in a world where the interchange of goods, information and people will henceforward take place on a planetary scale, the penalty of withdrawal will be decline'. In sub-Saharan Africa, the clash of the titans is being played out even today. In the academic year just ended, twenty six teachers from Gabon a former French colony on the West African coast were enrolled on a post-graduate program at Thames Valley University in London, an obvious indication of a change in preference. The program was aptly titled Millennium English Language as if by design it is an informed prediction of the outcome of the heavyweight title bout between English and French. This is significant because these teachers will in turn influence policies either at the formulation or implementation stages upon their return home. In view of this therefore, any worthwhile discussion of the language situation in Gabon cannot justifiably overlook this all-important development. Whereas, in the past, the character of bilingualism would have been a simple two-way algebra - Indigenous language + French or Indigenous language + Indigenous

language – a new dimension has been introduced which puts English in contention in characterizing the Gabonese bilingual's repertoire.

Pennycook (1994) sees British Council businesses dotted around the developing world as achieving the same results as the philosophy that underlies La Francophonie. The Overseas Development Authority (now Department for International Development) and other such agencies, some would argue, operate with a similar agenda. Williams' Malawian project that I draw upon in this discussion, however, was sponsored by that department and its contribution to the development of bilingual education in Malawi should become obvious in due time as a result of the vigor and ethnographic resources deployed in its execution. In this regard, the project may have avoided the pitfall of wrong presumptions that Fasold (1997: 256) warns Western funding agencies against while launching projects in the developing world (see Williams 1998).

Pakir (1983) reported that as a result of the type of language policy pursued by the Singapore government, the emerging bilingual trend was one of English-knowing bilingualism. This holds true for most postcolonial multi-ethnic countries because of the assumed 'neutrality' of English and therefore its political function or role in ensuring that no one group is threatened by the educational and language policies of government. This is the same basis for Bamgbose's conclusion that the architects of those policies in most of Africa saw the retention of ex-colonial languages in the formal domains as a safe compromise (1991).

Bilingual education

There are several levels at which the issue of bilingualism and biliteracy through schooling need to be addressed in relation to sub-Saharan Africa. West Africa was split between French and British colonial administrations so there's a level at which English and/or French play vital roles in determining who people are and who they want to be, that is anglophone or francophone. There's a second level at which the indigenous languages compete among themselves and the relative population of groups within each state is a major factor in drafting language and education policies. At a third level, the indigenous languages compete against the ex-colonial languages in certain domains although some domains are traditionally associated with one or the other. The focus on any of these levels falls on the material gains to be derived such as access to gainful employment, access to prestige social circles and a share in the resources of state. The languages that enhance these pursuits are better placed for the competition referred to in level 2. Directly associated with this is the subject of minority group interest within a pluralistic polity.

Bilingual education may mean the joint use of two or more languages in a classroom as in the Luxembourg experiment (see Baetens-Beardsmore 1999) or the use of Language A as medium of instruction in the first few years of schooling after which it is then replaced by Language B. A third bilingual education model is one with mother tongue instruction in primary school with English taught as a subject and a subsequent switch to English in post-primary education. The Ife Six-Year Primary Project exemplifies such a model. Under the auspices of UNESCO, the Ife mother tongue primary education project was set up in the late 1960s in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The experiment involved a selection of pupils receiving primary education solely in the medium of Yoruba while English was taught as a subject. Materials were produced specifically for the program maintaining the same content as those used with the control group. It was highly successful (see Afolayan 1984, Akinnaso 1989) and proved that mother tongue education works.

School and socialization

School enrolment in most Nigerian towns and cities shows a mix of ethnicities, languages and cultures. In such environments, pupils first experience from close quarters the contact situation that characterizes national life, away from the protection of their relatively monolithic homes. For minority pupils, school is the context within which they first confront the privileged statuses of the three national languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, and associated cultures. This contact however does not lead to a critical analysis of the situation for two reasons. The pupils are still too young to comprehend the sociopolitical implications of being in the minority and secondly, the institutional authority that supports these languages presents the situation they are in as the norm. It is often only as they grow older that they become conscious of their 'difference' in any critical sense.

Musgrave (1965: 141) describes the school as a kind of factory in which leaders are produced, in other words a site for the socialization of people, one in which the seedlings of democratic or communist principles are first planted, determining subsequently the kind of leaders they turn out to be. From this, it is obvious that schooling is part of both the social and political processes of a state. Society's social categorization is based, in addition to other factors, on educational attainment and there is a clear connection between this and the language skills acquired in the process of schooling. The stated objective of national unity in language policy documents in most cases would appear to have been achieved because information is purportedly generally available nation-wide in the medium of a shared ex-colonial language. However, considering the low literacy levels presented earlier, such claims of widespread access to information is open to challenge. Consequently, mass participation in the political process is not guaranteed and since national unity is anchored to that process, it becomes a difficult task to confront. I shall scrutinize the policy provisions for the flaws inherent in them next.

Ambiguity in policy provisions

Three documents specifically address the indigenous language issue in Nigeria: the Constitution of the Federal Republic (1979, 1999), the National Policy on Education (1977, revised 1981) and the Cultural Policy for Nigeria (1988).

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Information, 1999) stipulates under educational objectives in Chapter II:

> Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end Government shall as and when practicable provide
> a) free, compulsory and universal primary education;
> b) free secondary education;

There is an inherent vagueness in this statement with regard to the role of the various languages in defining 'literacy'. The only other part of the Constitution to mention something relating to language is Chapter IV Section 97, which says:

> The business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve.

The irony of this proclamation is that given the competitive nature of the Assemblies members establish claims to a well-rounded education by displaying their proficiency in English.

Oladejo (1993: 96) identified gross ambiguity as the major flaw in Nigeria's bilingual education program. With specific reference to sections of the policy provision he argued that the wording was open to variable interpretations thus causing great difficulty in implementation and assessing the extent to which the objectives have been achieved or indeed are achievable. For instance, Section 1 paragraph 8 of the National Policy on Education states that 'Government considers it in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages' without specifying the who, where, how and when of implementation. Its vagueness apart, minority language crusaders would find 'the three major languages' and 'national unity' incongruous especially since in the Nigerian case, not one of the three languages is spoken by up to a third of the population, the magical parliamentary fraction often required for a quorum.

The situation is no different in Ghana. The 'Program for the Provision of Free, Compulsory and Universal Basic Education by the Year 2005' document (Government of Ghana, 1994) for example lists seven objectives of primary education in Ghana the first of which is quite ambiguous. It reads 'Developing the child's ability to count, use numbers, read, write and communicate effectively' without specifying the language(s) through which these skills will be taught or learned. Also, ambiguity resides in recommendations contained in the 'Report of the Education Reforms Review Committee on Pre-tertiary Education' (Government of Ghana 1994: ii). One recommendation made was that:

> Every Ghanaian should be able to communicate in, and read and write a Ghanaian Language. By the end of the JSS (Junior Secondary School) every learner is expected to have achieved this objective. Consequently, the Ghanaian language should be a compulsory subject up to the end of Basic Education.

It is not clear from this statement what level of proficiency is intended and how this should be determined. The obvious consequence of this ambiguity is evident in the bilingual literacy project in Malawi and Zambia sponsored by the Department of International Development of the United Kingdom (see Williams 1998). Williams provides audio-visual evidence of pupils in the same school year who demonstrate wide margins of difference in their reading skills or outright inability to read concluding that while some pupils had problems with reading, others had problems with language. The extent to which these problems are anchored to socio-economic factors is only implicit in the evidence. It is pertinent however, that these problems require different solutions and ideally cannot be addressed in the same forum. The Malawian project lends an insight into the sociology of education in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the rural areas. Educational resources are scarce. There is a high pupils-reading text ratio in both English and Chichewa lessons. It must be said though that pupils were more active in the Chichewa lessons than the English ones, which is a plus for mother tongue education. There is equally a high teacher-pupils ratio, which restricts the choice of teaching methodology to teacher-centered approaches. All of these factors combine to keep national literacy at a low level.

To return to the subject of ambiguity, considering the sensitive nature of the language issue ambiguity is arguably a deliberate diplomatic ploy on the part of policy formulators to pre-

empt crisis. Vagueness provides an escape clause in the less obviously confrontational interpretation of the policy. This is understandable to some extent especially in Nigeria where the 40% minority population has become increasingly vocal in national politics, challenging all forms of subjugation. The crisis in the Niger Delta region, which became imprinted on the world's conscience following the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 8 in 1995, is a case in point.

The point about the exaggeration of the role of language in establishing national unity is bolstered by the instances of religious riots between 1983 and 1991 in Northern Nigeria in which victims included non-indigenes who had acquired varying degrees of proficiency in Hausa (Oladejo 1993: 97). During the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), Hausa-speaking Igbo folks were identified by their assailants through their substitution of the liquid [l] for [r] in a word like 'toro' (/tɔ:rɔ:/ meaning 'three pence'). In more contemporary times, Oladejo's claim has been further vindicated by the alleged pogrom of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo by Serbs with whom they had lived as neighbors for centuries. Prolonged contact and the resulting bilingualism did not stop these national misadventures. Against such a background it is pertinent that the former languages of colonization would assume an interventionist role as neutral languages (Bamgbose 1991).

However, it would seem that the association of language with national unity is an established phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. The objectives of primary education in Ghana includes 'Inculcating good citizenship in the child as a basis for effective participation in national development' and 'Laying the foundation for national unity and cohesion (especially through sports and cultural activities organized at District, Regional and National levels), (Government of Ghana, 1994: 4). Nowhere in the document is 'good citizenship' defined. That the nation comprises diverse groups is only implicit in the search for unity and cohesion but the methodology and medium are not contained in the objective.

The establishment of departments of African languages and literatures in some of the universities in the region would appear to address this institutional failure but the fact remains that in most cases these are academic exploits rather than schemes with a potential to dramatically raise vernacular literacy. These departments often have low enrolment figures and they often have to contend with the negative attitudes of their peers in other academic departments. The situation is slightly different in the case of the School of Ghanaian Languages in Adjumako, Ghana. The entire institution is devoted to the teaching of six indigenous languages viz, Dagbani, Ewe, Fante, Gan, Hausa and Twi, all of which are also languages of programs transmitted on Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. There are about 100 languages in Ghana. This provision does not therefore have a widespread applicability in terms of encouraging MT and English bilingualism and biliteracy. However it does mean theoretically that average Ghanaian students from ethnic groups other than these six may be trilingual but with biliteracy skills in English and one of the Big League languages of the GBC. In practice however, as the Honorable Minister for Education Mr. Harry Sawyerr (1994: 2) laments

> '[I]t is common knowledge that majority of the children in our public schools cannot read the English Language nor also the Ghanaian Language. ...To say the least, our public school children are weak in mathematics, reading and writing. The Criterion Referenced Test conducted by primary Education programme (PREP) in 1992 and 1993 confirmed that the levels of numeracy

> and literacy at primary six in our public schools are terribly low (see Appendix 1, Ghana's Education Reforms Review Committee Report.)

This is worrying especially since one of the central objectives of the education reforms with regard to basic education is 'improving the quality of teaching and raising the standard of basic education so that children acquire numeracy and literacy, i.e., ability to use numbers, read, write and communicate effectively' (Government of Ghana 1994: 2).

Baynham (1995) examined the controversy surrounding definitions of literacy in constructing a complementary model that includes both functional and critical awareness dimensions. The UNESCO definition that describes a person as literate

> when he [sic] has acquired the 'essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development (1962)

is simplistic in its concentration on the functional perspective and it is especially not an adequate one to apply to the sub-Saharan African situation with all the complex political issues that underlie the pursuit of L2 literacy. At a pragmatic level, it may be argued that the pressure of living in a multilingual society will warrant the learning of literacy skills in an L2 (sometimes). But it is at an ideological level that we have to debate the factors that confer the status of desirable or necessary additional languages in a community. Even the pragmatic level referred to has a further two dimensions to it: the practical level in which mutual co-existence needs to be negotiated across ethnicity and the second, which has a more mercenary approach to L2 literacy. Here, the skills acquired have a completely practical focus on the material gains that accrue from such knowledge.

What I call pragmatic or mercenary literacy which may entail some degree of fluency in speech but may not include writing or numeracy skills in an *unbalanced bilingual's* (Baker 1973, 1988) second language does not qualify as effective literacy per se. This category of people therefore may be classified as unbalanced biliterates by analogy to the parallel term unbalanced bilinguals in which the bilingual is better equipped in one or two of the communicative skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) than in others. Such a situation is obviously a handicap for people who may wish to be involved in transregional commercial activities and national level political involvement which tasks require multi-skill proficiency. This is a possibility considering the growing impact of ECOWAS in the West African region for instance. ECOWAS travellers' cheques have recently gone into circulation and the link between economics and language has been firmly established (see Pool 1991). In other words, true nationalists will be expected to demonstrate a capacity to interact across ethnic boundaries without any communicative hazards.

Bilingualism and identity

Bilingualism is one of the hallmarks of postcolonial identity in sub-Saharan Africa. The new nations have facilitated the growth of bilingualism among the various populations of the region. As I mentioned in discussing language politics in the region above, the old Trans-Saharan trade routes that linked North Africa and the Middle East to the northern fringes of the West African Savannah also served as forum for multilingual engagements. On the Atlantic coast, much of the 19th century witnessed large scale commercial activities and

foreran Afro-European and Afro-American relations that culminated subsequently in the scramble for and partition of the continent. Implicit in those relations was the phenomenon of contact. The only major change therefore in postcolonial Africa is the preponderance of bilingualism that involves English and an African language rather than a combination of two African languages. These two subtypes of bilingualism confer distinct social identities on those who possess them. School is the factory in which the former is produced based on language and education policies of government. The other develops at an individual level within the informal sector with or without government sanction.

Bilingualism as earlier argued does not presuppose biliteracy or indeed any literacy at all. The communicative tasks that people are confronted with in their pursuit of ordinary day-to-day existence may be simply verbal. When this involves reading and writing, rural Africa depends on its 'ambassadors' (see Achebe's *Arrow of God* 1967) for interpretation and translation. Judging from reports coming from ethnographic studies, it would seem that there is dwindling biliteracy and rising focus and interest in English language proficiency. Beyond being a social class marker as it used to be in the early years of independence, it has become a prerequisite for existence.

'The institution of free primary education for all during the late nineteenth century in both Britain (1872) and France (1881-86) was intended to ensure that the whole population achieved at least basic levels of skill in literacy and numeracy. The purposes were both social and economic: to enable the industrial revolution to call on a workforce which could manage (more) complex machinery and understand instructions, but also to ensure that citizens could participate in democracy' says Dennis Ager (1996: 77). Social, political and economic development in sub-Saharan Africa today requires no less. Mass participation in the region's fledgling democracies needs critical biliteracy to survive, especially in the rural areas. So, evidently and in consonance with Fasold's (1997) pronouncement literacy is not simply about economics, it seems to be anchored to functionality whichever way we look at the issue.

The agenda of virtually all military dictatorships in sub-Saharan Africa since independence in the mid-century has been that even though on paper large funds have been committed to education in annual budgets, in reality, central governments paid lip service to the project. Mass literacy with its potential consequences of awareness raising in relation to the pursuit of democracy would have been in conflict with the military's fetish for control. The interesting thing is that the colonial model itself while not borne out of any kind of desire to keep the mass uneducated, did not seem to have achieved much success as Ager (1996: 77) observed. According to him, the efforts to raise literacy levels during and between World War I and World War II 'did not remedy matters'. This fact led to the Butler Act of 1944, which limited central government role to simply providing money and no direct involvement in teacher recruitment or curriculum design. This was challenged in the 1980s.

Some proficiency in English is compulsory for anyone seeking to participate in public life in Nigeria. In fact, it may be described as a gate-keeping tool as university entrance requires a credit level pass in the GCE Ordinary level English examination. In that role, it defines the context of bilingual education and biliteracy. In the early years of independence, monolingual upbringing of children was commonplace among the minority but powerful elite so that between grandchildren and grandparents in some cases, interaction was hampered except when there was a mediating and willing third party playing the role of interpreter. Even then cultural logic was sacrificed sometimes because English could not efficiently handle the cultural meta-text of the indigenous languages. But this shortcoming was over-compensated

for by gains in the material and economic sector within which such people assumed authority and decision-making roles, thus excluding the majority who did not speak English.

Consequently of the prestige factor, the attitude of the excluded majority to this 'restricted code' (in relation to traditional society) was ironically largely positive. Although as society became more and more aware and politically sophisticated in relation to the international community a shift began to occur, one which gave some recognition to the indigenous languages. This shift is reflected in the responses of 86 Nigerian teachers who participated in a postal survey. This is of particular significance because teachers have the responsibility of nurturing the nation's younger population. Asked what language they would speak/spoke to their children at home, 8 abstained, 36 opted for English and an indigenous language (IE), 13 preferred interacting in the medium of an indigenous L1 and 29 opted for English. From this result, IE seems to be the compromise position but otherwise, English, even in the domestic context of home, is still more popular than the indigenous languages.

The distinction made in the early days between school-derived 'book knowledge' and 'traditional wisdom' which one acquired by associating with the sages are no longer being seriously made. Bilingualism was not a feature of a majority of the old generation; even though they sanctioned schooling and the learning of English, they did not process its potential for creating new social hybrid identities. English and the cultures associated with it remained foreign and a functional tool. This is in conflict with the emerging notions of identity in postmodernism and cultural studies.

The impact of French and French culture in Francophone Africa is different from the impact of English in Anglophone Africa. This is simply due to the different administrative frameworks of 'assimilation' and 'association' instituted by the two colonial regimes respectively. Thus creating a different socialization process (cf. 'much of the history taught in Russian schools is given a bias with the intention of making the children loyal to the Communist regime so that they will see the world in the way that the rulers of Russia wish them to do'.

'... in describing the War of the Spanish Succession, British books tend to mention only British victories and omit French ones. French books tend to minimize or omit the part played by Marlborough. Both sides claim to have won the war' (source unknown).

In the African context, there is a paucity of indigenous materials aimed at 'correcting' the largely Western portraiture of the continent or even simply constructing a contrasting Afro-centric perspective of knowledge, history and society in postcolonial times. In nursery and primary schools across sub-Saharan Africa, the *Ananse Stories* have to compete with Cinderella, and other Western fables. This has grave implications for the children's concept of 'self' and nation. Institutional priorities and the economic situation in most countries continuously thwart any recognition of the production of knowledge as a social enterprise (see Martin-Jones and Heller 1996).

Education also separates socio-economic classes and rural/urban populations through the preponderance of English in the discourse of one and its marginality in the social reality of the other. In most rural areas, English is a school subject whereas in urban areas, the plurality of their composition means that it is an effective tool in bridging gaps and aiding social interaction across ethnic divides. Williams (1998: 58) reports from his study of literacy in Malawi and Zambia that 'there are considerable urban/rural differences in English reading

proficiency' in both countries with urban areas outperforming rural areas. Omoniyi (1990: 106) makes a similar observation in a study of rural and urban secondary school students' lexical proficiency across several domains in Nigeria.

Literacy and conflicting histories

It is equally important in discussing bilingualism and biliteracy through schooling to revisit the content of reading materials in the English and French languages in primary schools across West Africa. The identities of the social and cultural terrain as constructed by the books written for the schools by the colonial administration were aimed at producing pro-colonial citizens, by constructing a Tarzanic image of the colonialist or by fanning a spirit of gratitude for the great favors done.

As Achebe documented in *Arrow of God* Africans did not simply accept colonization without questioning it. They were curious but also weary in calculating its intentions and long term impact. That it was a gamble is evident in Achebe's tragic hero Ezeulu saying

> I shall send one of my sons so that if there's something there to be gained, I'll have my share, and if there's nothing, I won't have lost anything. But I don't want to say 'I should have known!'

This is evidence of a calculated and pragmatic gamble. But perhaps more interesting is the contradiction between the details of oral history and the claims that formed the bedrock of colonial literacy. Matters, for instance, to do with village or communal boundaries, ownership and right of access to natural resources such as forests, rivers, farmlands and so on were hitherto passed down orally from generation to generation and when the details became fuzzy, the traditional leadership intervened in an adjudicating role. This 'savage' method of preserving knowledge was replaced with documentation and the control of knowledge passed to its colonial architects. Records of the various 'journeys of discovery' by British adventurers in the 18th and 19th centuries became the materials for texts in mission schools in subjects like History, Social Studies and Geography. In other words, the colonialists produced knowledge about sub-Saharan Africa for sub-Saharan African school children, of course from their own cultural perspectives and understanding of that socio-cultural reality which was essentially alien to them. So it was that Richard and John Lander appropriated the 'ownership' of the Niger Delta through their claim of discovering its mouth. Exchanges such as the one below in a social studies class were commonplace even after independence in Nigeria.

Teacher: Who first sailed on the Niger?
Pupils: John Clapperton!
Teacher: Who discovered the mouth of the River Niger?
Pupils: Richard and John Lander.

Not only are such accounts of history farcical, but they also conflict with the sociocultural reality around which a people's identity is woven. Long before European incursion into the Niger delta, the river had defined people's lives. Their means of livelihood was fishing and even religious beliefs were constructed around water-borne spirits. Thus, school experience called to question the validity of their very existence as riverine folks. Directly linked to this is the significance of indigenous participation in knowledge production. Martin-Jones and Heller's (1996: 129) remark to the effect that

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> It is always an empirical question as to what kinds of interests will inform educational practices and ideologies and as to what is considered important about the language of instruction and about language learning and assessment in multilingual settings.
>
> Educational ideologies focus on individual development as a basis for the evaluation of merit, thereby relegating to the margins consideration of knowledge production as a social enterprise

raises two quite salient points that are directly related to this issue; language in relation to the ideological framework within which education is taking place, and the locus of rights and responsibility of a society both to consume and produce knowledge. If the educational system is set up to aid development and invigorate society then the kind of knowledge described above which is anchored to the colonial project is a counter-force. The social studies curriculum in Nigeria have since been reviewed to excise such contradiction, align school with society's history and cultural repertoire, and reorientate the pupils' perception of their communities and notions of their own identity in relation to it.

Education and the institution of politics

There is an obvious link between education and political sophistication of nations. Education holds the key to the mobilization people for mass participation in democracies around the world. This is often the motivation for making free and compulsory education a campaign issue. Realization of the potential education has to raise the consciousness of masses of the population may arguably have led to a stalling on the part of Africa's elite class as a strategy of preserving the status quo. The universal nature of such a scheme is exemplified by the defeat of the education bill of 1807 in the British Parliament on the grounds that education will teach commoners evil ways, such as attacking Christianity, rising beyond their classes, becoming bold enough to question the aristocracy.

In the case of West Africa, without access to English and French education, the extent to which people can participate in the electoral process is limited. In the 1999 Nigerian elections, The Transition Monitoring Group, a non-governmental organization made up of a coalition of 44 human rights organizations, reported thus on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) performance in the December 5, 1998 election:

> There was widespread lack of awareness among voters on how to vote, thumb print or even identify the parties and the candidates of their choice. In some cases, voters did not understand that they should thumb print the ballot papers before inserting them into the boxes. In other cases, ballot boxes were invalidated because voters thumb printed in between the boxes of the parties.

Such incapacity is the consequence of widespread illiteracy. Considering that bilingual education policies and various literacy schemes have been in place for almost three decades, this may be taken as an indication of failure so far.

School bilingualism

There is variation in language policy for education across sub-Saharan Africa. In Tanzania for instance, all primary education is conducted in Kiswahili after independence (Barrett 1994) while English is used at all educational levels beyond primary school. In Botswana, Standards

1 to 4 are taught in Setswana, and English in Standards 5 to 7 (Arthur 1994: 39) s a consequence of which there is official bilingualism (Setswana + English) but unofficial multilingualism (Mother Tongue + Setswana + English). In other words, there are pupils who are bilingual by the end of third year by virtue of being speakers of a mother tongue other than Setswana, whereas for speakers of Setswana, the onset of bilingualism is delayed until the fourth year of school. The Nigeria Policy on Education has similar consequences since it stipulates the use of mother tongues or language of the immediate community (LIC) for the first three years of primary school and from then on English. Thus native speakers of the LICs do not encounter bilingualism until the fourth year when English is introduced as the medium of instruction. However, for those who hail from minority language backgrounds for whom the LIC is a second language, contending with bilingualism and devising strategies to cope with it starts on Day One of schooling. This situation is common across sub-Saharan Africa.

In the upper primary classes, widespread use of indigenous L1s is reported even though the domain is distinctly marked as English or French domain by legislation (see Table 2). Rubagumya (1994) observed that in Tanzanian classrooms, Kiswahili is used for informal or administrative purposes while the lesson proper is taught in English. The latter he classified as 'aside' with the implied differentiation between core and marginal classroom languages, notably corroborating the implications of language distribution in classrooms (Jacobson 1990). Consequently, it would seem that the bilingualism and biliteracy that results from this process will reflect the imbalance in status of the languages involved. In Nigerian classrooms, actions taken to check the use of indigenous languages in the so-called English domains include the imposition of fines and detention hours.

Out of 86 teachers who participated in a postal survey, only about a quarter (22) claimed that their pupils engaged in leisure reading involving non-curriculum texts. Interestingly however, when asked to name the books read, seven of these teachers provided the titles of books written in English. This is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, obviously these seven teachers misunderstood the question thus raising the issue of teacher quality and the impact it has on product quality as Obeng and Adegbija have also noted (1999: 358). Second, there is a conflict between the pupils' language preference in three contexts: classroom, outside classroom during recess, outside classroom after school hours and teachers' own language values indicated in their choice of language of interaction with their own children.

Table 2. Teachers' perception of their pupils' preferred languages in three contexts

LANGUAGE	CONTEXT		
	Classroom	Recess	After School
English	25	13	3
Indigenous language	41	51	61
Indigenous Language + English (IE)	18	20	20

In reality, the IE compromise seems from this distribution to be a 'forced' one considering the widespread use of the indigenous language across all three contexts (cf. Baetens Beardsmore's Immediate Pertinency Hypothesis, 1999). Against this background, the pass requirement for English in the Common Entrance Examination (for secondary school entry) and the General Certificate Examination Ordinary Level (for University entry) may be seen as a harsh gate-keeping strategy. It conflicts with the core objective of the Decade for Education in Africa (1997-2006) which is to 'remove all obstacles impeding progress towards Education for All' (Resolution AHG/Res.251 [XXXII] of the Assembly of Heads of State and

Government of the OAU) (see African Economic Report - 1998). Thus the success of mother tongue education schemes and other tested bilingual education strategies in raising attainment levels in English while promoting indigenous language proficiency and status deserves further exploration.

Even teachers who are supposed to be the implementers of the policy often send their own children to fee-paying nursery schools where they acquire some degree of proficiency in an ex-colonial language before reaching actual school age (cf. Boadi 1971: 57; Omoniyi 1995). While this may be an indication of the importance of English and/or French in national life it also conveys, albeit only implicitly, the teachers' lack of trust in the existing system and policy. The fact remains that this practice has made education in these two languages commercially viable. Today there are private kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. The last of Nigeria's military administrations on the eve of its departure in May 1999 granted licenses to enable private investors in education to establish a number of universities to complete the circle. The private schools operate very much like the British public schools in that they are not obliged to follow the national curriculum. Often they have a broader and 'richer' curriculum including French, English and German in primary school syllabi. They feed a philosophy of elitism and subsequent inequality as they are often very expensive and beyond the reach of common folks.

Conclusion

The final word cannot be said on this issue just yet. Both bilingualism and biliteracy as concepts raise complex issues no matter the context. The dimension and perspectives that different countries adopt in dealing with them must be determined by the sociocultural realities of the individual contexts in spite of any general theoretical principles that may be agreed upon. However, there are a number of universal truths. Monolingualism is a spent force that is fast conceding the center to bi(multi)lingualism as the power of the new millennium. The politics surrounding the adding or losing of languages is a passionate one because it feeds issues of identity that are themselves unavoidably passionately political and politicized. Currently, bilingualism and bilingual education involving the World's major languages, especially in postcolonial societies, are chronically individualistic in focus and materialistic in goal. In multilingual and multicultural communities, the theme of any worthwhile language policy must be 'bilingual education for responsible citizenship', be it national or global, for it is only then that the ultimate goal of unity can be attained. It is only then that minority groups will cease to feel threatened and intimidated by those groups in whose languages they access education.

In the specific context of sub-Saharan Africa, sociopolitical development of individuals and the state are directly linked to education. The first three decades of independence in the region witnessed only modest progress in the advancement of indigenous languages and literatures in real terms in spite of their being accorded constitutional recognition. Yet this advancement must take place in order for efficient and productive bilingualism and biliteracy to take root, however they are defined in context. Renaissance of indigenous arts and culture will cause derogatory views of vernacular literacy as second best after English or French to die gradually. Changing attitudes will change the perception of bilingualism 'as a strategy for socioeconomic success' in the bid to move from the social periphery to the center (Heller 1999: 219). What started off as 'credentialized bilingualism', to borrow another of Monica Heller's terms, coupled with biliteracy must indeed expand to become the pivot of sub-Saharan Africa's recognition of its own potential, true individual and institutional identities and the force behind the region's wind of change. The efforts to move the region's fledgling

democracies forward can aid and be aided by that progression. A good starting point would be the revisitation of programs such as the UNESCO-sponsored Ife Six-Year Mother Tongue Primary Project.

The possibility of new hegemonic equations emerging in which minority ethnic groups and their languages are subordinated to one or two main languages and their speakers in imperial fashion exists and will have to be addressed as a continuing process. Evidence of the disquiet such problems can cause if ignored are already obvious in the formation of minority pressure groups some of which have resulted in ethnic wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Rwanda and so on. There are ways of avoiding such catastrophes. First, the promotion of vernacular literacy will require the production of materials in the indigenous languages, a step which should encourage the realization that knowledge production is a social enterprise (Martin-Jones and Heller, 1996). Second, reading and writing in the indigenous languages will benefit from promotional schemes such as nationally recognized and acknowledged writing competitions. Third, the language curriculum should be expanded to include more languages along the lines of Israel's Three Plus Program (Shohamy 1999), in other words multilingual education should be the ideal goal. Once this is done, native speakers of the main indigenous languages must be encouraged and required to take modules in at least one additional language from the list of minority languages. Such a step will automatically boost the status of those languages and drastically reduce the threat and intimidation felt by their native speakers. Fourth, the practical problems of personnel can be addressed by providing incentives to trainee teachers entering indigenous language programs. The debates will continue on both local and international levels. Both corpus and status planning are required to boost the indigenous languages while efforts at promoting increased proficiency in English and other languages of wider communication in use in the region are sustained in line with transnational and globalization trends in development.

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